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ABSTRACT

This guide offers answers to questions parents may have about discussing the Persian Gulf War with their children. The following questions are among those chosen: Should children watch programs about the War in the Persian Gulf? Won't it just scare children more if we talk about it? How can I listen to my children in the most effective and helpful way? How do I deal with the conflicting opinions that exist about the War? What should I do if my child wants to learn more about War but the school isn't teaching about it? A section on the role schools can play in helping children to cope with and learn about the Persian Gulf War is included. A 17-item list of resources for parents also is included. (DB)

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TALKING ABOUT WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF:

A Discussion Guide for Teachers

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TALKING ABOUT WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF

A Discussion Guide for Teachers

Prepared by Susan Jones and Sheldon Berman
Educators for Social Responsibility

Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of war. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds and to give them the best of our understanding and our guidance. Educators for Social Responsibility has prepared this guide for teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and other educators who are concerned about how to communicate with young people about the war in the Persian Gulf.

This guide explores some of the questions that teachers ask about facilitating conversations on controversial and emotional topics. In preparation for talking with students we encourage you to contact parents to let them know of your plans and to suggest ways they can support you. We hope this helps you listen and respond to the concerns of the children you care about.

HOW CAN I JUDGE IF MY STUDENTS ARE READY TO TALK ABOUT THE WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF?

Most children from age four or five and up have heard about the war and would appreciate talking with adults they trust. In the media there is daily discussion of Persian Gulf issues and the war. It is unlikely that children know nothing at all about it. However, it is quite likely that they have some confusion about the facts and the dangers, and that they have mistaken information, questions, and some strong feelings. Often children are hesitant to share their questions and fears with adults. For this reason, we recommend that adults open the way for children to talk about their concerns.

HOW DO I OPEN UP THE SUBJECT OF THE WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF WITH MY STUDENTS?

The key word here is LISTEN. Most experts agree that it is best NOT to open up a conversation with your students by giving them a lecture — even an informal, introductory lecture — on the war in the Persian Gulf.

Don't burden children with information they may not be ready for. The best approach is to listen carefully to children's spontaneous questions and comments, and then respond to them in an appropriate, supportive way. Let your students' concerns, in their own words, guide the direction of the discussion. Some children may not bring the subject up. Some may genuinely not be concerned about it. Others may think that adults do not want them to talk about it.

And others may be too overwhelmed by their feelings to open up a discussion. It is particularly important that we help children who are troubled but have difficulty talking about their concerns. We can at least check out their feelings in order to decide whether a discussion is appropriate. One way is to ask simple opening questions, "Have you heard about the war in the Persian Gulf?" or "Do you ever think about the war in the Persian Gulf?" or "How do you feel about the war in the Persian Gulf?" Then, no matter what their response is, we need to listen — carefully and very caringly — to what our children have to say. We may want to use other vehicles such as drawing and journal writing to help young people express their feelings.

Although it is generally preferable to involve the whole class in this conversation, in some situations, it may be appropriate to have individual or small group discussions instead.

WON'T IT JUST SCARE STUDENTS MORE IF WE TALK ABOUT IT?

No, not if you listen to students and respond in a supportive, sensitive way to what you hear. No matter how frightening some feelings are, it is far more frightening to think that no one is willing to talk about them. If we communicate by our silence that this — or any other subject — is too scary or upsetting to talk about, then the children who depend on us may experience the added fear that we are not able to take care of them. Young children especially need to feel secure that their teachers can manage difficult topics and deep feelings.

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TALKING ABOUT WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF

HOW CAN I LISTEN TO MY STUDENTS IN THE MOST EFFECTIVE AND HELPFUL WAY?

As you listen to your students, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from THEIR point of view. Don't make judgments about what they say no matter how silly or illogical it may sound to you at first. If you don't understand something, ask them to explain it. Show your respect for them and their ideas.

As all parents and teachers know, children are not always able to express what they mean. Also what they say doesn't always mean the same thing for them as it does for adults. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what's going on behind the initial words they utter. Comments such as, "That's interesting, can you tell me more about it?" or "What exactly do you mean by that?" or "Why do you believe that...?" are examples of ways to elicit more information from children without judging the rightness or wrongness of what they are saying.

If they seem to be struggling to make something clear it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarize and focus their concerns. For example, you might say, "It sounds to me as if you have heard some horrible stories about the effects of the bombing and you want to know if they're true." Or, "Let me see. You've heard that Iraq had some complaints with Kuwait that were the cause of their invasion and also that they want to conquer other countries in the Arab world and you're confused about which position is right. Is that what you're saying?" Probing questions and statements help children sort out their ideas without interfering with their thinking process. This also helps other children understand what their classmates are saying.

Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may not be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages — facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, posture, tone of voice, or any other signals that strong emotions may be present.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH THE RANGE OF EMOTIONS THAT STUDENTS MAY HAVE ABOUT THE WAR?

It is natural and healthy for there to be a wide range of emotions and opinions about the war. Some students will be sad, anxious, and even fearful for their own and their family's safety. Others will be confused about how to make sense of the events. Others will have little affect. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation. And others will have a mix of emotions — pride, sorrow, and worry, for example. Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with the death and suffering of war and the reasons that adults resort to armed conflict. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings students have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary school children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary and middle school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents it will involve issues of ethics and issues of their own potential involvement. In listening to their feelings you will be able to hear the underlying issues. Responding to these underlying concerns can be of great assistance to your students. In some areas such as in the area of their personal safety we can provide reassurance but in other areas our role should be that of a listener and a facilitator. We can help them learn to hear each other and respond to each other in caring ways.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure students, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much they care about others and the world around them. We can clearly tell them that it is this caring that is the source of our strength and our hope.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH THE WIDE RANGE OF OPINIONS THAT STUDENTS MAY HAVE?

Opinions about the war will also vary greatly from strong support to strong opposition, especially among older students. Because many students have close personal connections with those directly involved in the war — students whose family members are serving in the armed forces in the Persian Gulf, living in the Middle East, or active in protests against the war — the disagreements among them could be significant and heated. It is important to help students separate the issues of patriotism from agreement or disagreement with government policies. It is also important to help students understand that one can support the troops who are fighting in the war and still raise questions about policy issues or about the use of war as a vehicle for resolving conflicts. We can communicate to students that different viewpoints enrich our understanding and are not personal attacks.

As a first step in constructing a productive dialogue about the war, you may want to set some ground rules so that children feel safe to share their thoughts and opinions. The students themselves can help construct this list, which might include such things as "no put downs," "respect each other's feelings and points of view," and "let each person finish speaking before responding." You will want to communicate that this is an opportunity for them to hear the diversity of feelings and opinions about the war and a chance to learn from each other. In terms of dealing with different opinions, you may want to have students formalize a respectful way of disagreeing by having students state their disagreements in the form of "I see things differently.

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I think that..." rather than telling other students that they are wrong. It is important that you and your students find ways to affirm the different perspectives even if they are unpopular. It is best to avoid the polarization produced by debates and instead structure the conversation as a dialogue where each position is illuminated so that it can be understood clearly. Additional materials on dialogue and conflict resolution are available through ESR.

This kind of conversation is an important way for students to learn to appreciate and appropriately respond to the feelings of others. It is also an opportunity for them to appreciate and learn from the different perspectives of the students in their class.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH STUDENTS WHO ARE FASCINATED BY THE WAR?

Due to the way war is often portrayed in the media, it is natural for some students to be fascinated and at times excited by it. Pre-adolescent boys, especially, may have a fascination with the weaponry and strategy. Because our public language for talking about war is highly sanitized and the reporting of the war often takes on the tone of a sports event, some children may not be sensitive to the suffering created by war and the sadness or anxiety other children may be experiencing. We need to listen to these students and acknowledge the compelling quality of the action and technology of war, and the courage and commitment of those involved. We also need to help them see the other dimensions of war. In age-appropriate ways we can help students see the human and environmental consequences for all sides and the complexity of the issues involved.

ARE THERE PARTICULAR STUDENTS TO WHOM WE SHOULD PAY CLOSER ATTENTION?

Yes, we may need to pay special attention to children who share a culture with the people in the Middle East, children who have relatives serving in the Persian Gulf, and children who have relatives living in the Persian Gulf countries.

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In times of war people tend to dehumanize those in the opposing country and create images of them that are distorted and demeaning. This can emerge in ethnic slurs and jokes, as well as in actual physical abuse. This can also emerge in statements that communicate a desire for wholesale extermination of the Iraqi people such as, "We should blow the whole country off the map," or "Let's just wipe them all out."

Prejudice may emerge against other nationalities from the Middle East as well.

Because our students generally have little knowledge about this area of the world other than the stereotypes with which they are often presented, they inappropriately may lump together the diverse cultures of the Middle East.

We will have to pay special attention to make children aware of this potential for prejudice and abuse. We and our students need to reach out to those students who may be most vulnerable to protect and support them. At times this may mean directly intervening to stop such abuse. It is important to help students avoid creating a one dimensional image of the Iraqi people, or any people, as simply "the enemy." We can help them understand that the Iraqi people are human beings who experience joy and pain as we do, have differences of opinion, and deserve respect. Students can also begin to learn about Iraqi history and culture as well as about the many cultures of the Middle East in general.

For many children fears and anxiety will come and go but for those children who have family and close friends involved in or living near the conflict the anxiety and fears are more constant. There are some special things that can be done to help these students. First, we need to identify who they are and inform the guidance staff. Second, it may be helpful to have a support group for these students so that they can talk about their specific concerns. Third, in classroom conversations about the war, we need to pay special attention to affirming the courage and commitment of their relative and separating that from domestic differences of opinion about the issues related to the war. These students can be valuable contributors to the class conversation, adding an important human dimension to the conflict.

Some of these children may have to cope with the death of their relative or friend. It is appropriate for the school and the class to grieve with the student in both formal and informal ways. If this occurs it would be helpful to find people in your area who are experienced in dealing with this to help the school respond with sensitivity and care.

AFTER I HAVE LISTENED TO MY STUDENTS' CONCERNS ABOUT THE WAR, HOW DO I RESPOND? SHOULD I GIVE THEM FACTS?

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the war, even after we have heard what's on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make.

First, for young children we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation they have picked up and help them distinquish fantasy from reality. When we have listened to what they think, we can gently correct their misinformation by such statements as, "By the way, it isn't true that terrorists are polluting our water supply," or "You said that you were afraid to go out because you didn't have a gas mask like others on TV. Iraq is very far away and we do not need to use gas masks to protect ourselves."

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We can also answer children's direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. A child who asks, "How many countries are involved in the war?" or "What does 'to occupy Kuwait' mean?" deserves a factual answer. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent — underlying confusions or unexpressed anxiety — then ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully.

Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of your children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's question.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not clear and straightforward. When students ask such questions as "Why did we go to war?" or "What will happen when the war is over?" we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another. It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict. It helps them to understand that articulating these differences is part of our democratic tradition and how we come to make good decisions about complex issues.

Finally, we can give students the opportunity to continue to explore their questions and to learn from this conflict. One of the most effective ways we have found to involve students of all ages in this exploration is to ask them to brainstorm:

(l) what they already know about the conflict,

(2) what they think they know but they are not sure about, and

(3) what questions they have about it.

After prioritizing their questions in terms of which questions should be answered first, the class can engage in interviews, readings, and library research. This process is also appropriate for older students.

Students of all ages can explore the issue of conflict and examine the variety of ways that conflict are resolved.

For older students, the conflict raises important issues about the ethics of war, patriotism, foreign policy, the ways conflicts are best resolved, the Middle East conflict in general, and the ways we can insure global security. These are important issues for young people to talk about and think through.

At the same time, young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution. This is an opportunity for them to explore alternative means of resolving conflicts and ways that, even when a conflict becomes violent, people continue to pursue efforts to resolve it. In addition, it would be valuable for students to think about how we can best pursue a constructive post-war policy that promotes peace and security.

HOW CAN I TALK WITH STUDENTS IF I FEEL THAT MY OWN GRASP OF THE FACTS AND ISSUES IS INADEQUATE?

Fortunately, we don't need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated, technical answers. And when older children ask for information we don't have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together."

The process of figuring out where to go for information and going through the steps to get it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding.

SHOULD I TELL MY STUDENTS HOW I FEEL?

We may bring with us powerful feelings about the war that we have great difficulty concealing. Letting students know that you are saddened or worried about the war or proud of the people serving in the military is appropriate provided that it is done in a sensitive way. Because there are several dangers in sharing our feelings about war outright, especially with young children, we need to carefully consider our reasons for sharing our feelings with children and understand how it can affect them.

The most serious danger is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and fears for them rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have.

Another danger is that we might cut off the expression of what's on their minds as we get wrapped up in expressing what's on ours. We might even miss hearing what our children want to tell us. Even worse, we might unwittingly and subtly communicate the message that what THEY have to say is not important.

A third danger is that we might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying OUR need to "give" our children something rather than satisfying THEIR need to be heard and understood.

This is not to say, however, that we need to be passive. Good listening is an active process. And, after we've listened carefully, it is appropriate for us to respond in ways that provide assurance that adults care and are trying to promote peace.

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HOW CAN I TALK WITH MY STUDENTS WHEN I HONESTLY DON'T FEEL VERY HOPEFUL MYSELF?

On the one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the war. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on our children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to your children, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other educators with similar feelings who meet to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group isn't practical, then you might find a caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes much easier to offer genuine help to the children in your class.

I HAVE STRONG OPINIONS ABOUT THE WAR. SHOULD I TELL MY STUDENTS WHAT I BELIEVE?

Your opinion in the classroom carries a great deal of weight with students, especially younger children. We recommend that you focus instead on helping your students to think critically about many points of view, and to arrive at their own, well thought-out conclusions. Stating one's opinion, especially in the early stages of the discussion, can block open communication. It may prevent students who hold different opinions from openly sharing and discussing these for fear of both disapproval and of being wrong to hold that opinion.

It is important to communicate to our students an openness to hearing other points of view and a respect for the people who hold them. Helping children understand that the issue of war is a complex one allows them to feel that their opinions can make a contribution to our understanding of the issue. We recommend that you stress the importance of studying a variety of points of view and learning to appreciate what each has to offer.

MY STUDENTS KNOW A LOT ABOUT THE WAR AND WANT TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. IS IT APPROPRIATE FOR ME TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO ACT?

The issue of war can be distressing for young people. Sometimes simply knowing the facts can lead to anxiety, fear, and powerlessness. One way to help young people overcome these feelings is to engage them in taking actions that make a difference.

There are many actions young people can take, the first and most important being to learn more about the issue. From there, however, it is important that young people learn to act to make a difference in their own worlds. Even very young children can do something to gain a sense of participation in their world. Writing a letter to the troops, to the President or another elected official, or to the editor of the local newspaper are things children can do. Other forms of action might be something as simple as drawing a poster expressing the desire for peace or as sophisicated as helping raise money for the Red Cross. Students can also educate others. They can set up study groups, organize symposia, put together a library of resources, or publish their own book or newsletter. However, it is important that the students generate and implement the actions THEY choose to pursue. Within a class, it is appropriate for students to choose from a wide a variety of actions so that each student is able to select something that is appropriate to him or her. Although it may be helpful for students to know the range of things that other students and adults are doing to make a difference, adults must remember not to enlist young people in their own causes. Because young people know about the war does not mean that it is their responsibility to solve the problem. This is the adult's job and children need to know that adults are assuming this responsibility.

WHAT SHOULD BE MY OVERALL GOALS FOR TALKING WITH STUDENTS ABOUT THE WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF?

This conversation with students will not be a one-time occurrence. The war in the Persian Gulf will come up over and over again, even after the war ends. Students need to take time to process their feelings and thoughts. Therefore we will need to think about our long-term goals for talking with students. We would like to suggest six primary goals:

1. We are talking with students in order to help them understand that they are not alone in their thinking and feelings and to give them a safe place to share with each other and to struggle with the issue.
2. We want to empower students by helping them gain confidence in their ability to understand what is going on around them, to acquire information from a variety of sources, to appreciate divergent perspectives, and to learn about a complex issue.
3. We want to prevent the emergence of dehumanization, prejudice, stereotyping, and victimization of any group.
4. We want to help students understand the human and environmental consequences of war and see it in all its complexity.
5. We want to help students explore alternatives to war and learn conflict resolution skills that might enable them to deal more effectively with conflicts both personal and global.
6. We want to give them some sense of power and control by providing them with opportunities to act to make a difference.

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There are no easy answers to the issues we have raised here. These discussions will be challenging. They call upon us to do our best teaching in the most difficult of circumstances. Yet they are vitally important to the young people in our classroom. They can provide our students with the support, hope, and understanding they need in this difficult time.

TALKING ABOUT WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

"Helping Young Children Understand Peace, War, and the Nuclear Threat," Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1834 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009, (800) 424-2460.

The War Play Dilemma, Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin, available from Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 492-1764.

Who's Calling the Shots?: How to Respond Effectively to Children's Fascination with War Play and War Toys, Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin, New Society Publishers, 4527 Springfield Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143, (215) 382-6543.

Elementary Perspectives: Teaching Concepts of Peace and Conflict, William Kreidler, Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 492-1764.

Creative Conflict Resolution, William Kreidler, available from Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 492-1764.

Second Step: A Skill Training Curriculum to Prevent Youth Violence, Committee for Children, 172 20th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122, (206) 322-5050.

"Crisis in the Gulf: A Study Circle on American's Choices," Study Circles Resource Center, PO Box 203, 697 Pomfret St., Pomfret, CT 06258, (203) 928-2616.

"The ACCESS Guide to the Persian Gulf Crisis," ACCESS, 1730 M St., NW, Suite 605, Washington, DC 20036, (800) 888-6033.

Focus on Iraq: Resources on the Present Crisis in the Persian Gulf, the Moorhead Kennedy Institute of the American Forum for Global Education, 45 John Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10038, (212) 732-8606.

Faces of the Enemy, Sam Keen, Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd St., New York, NY 10022.

Great Decisions 1991, Foreign Policy Association, 729 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10019, (212) 764-4050.

Opposing Viewpoints Series, Greenhaven Press, PO Box 289009, San Diego, CA 92198-0009, (800) 231-5163.

Taking Sides Series, Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., Sluice Dock, Guilford, CT 06437, (800) 243-6532.

Resolving Conflicts Creatively: A Draft Curriculum for Secondary Schools, ESR Metro, 475 Riverside Dr., Rm. 450, New York, NY 10115, (212) 870-3318.

Conflict Resolution: A Secondary School Curriculum, Community Board Center for Policy and Training, 149 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103, (415) 552-1250.

Information on Dealing with Childhood Grief: National Childhood Grief Institute, 6200 Colonial way, Minneapolis, MN 55436, (612) 920-0737.

A Resource for Parents: "Talking About the War in the Persian Gulf: A Discussion Guide for Parents," Susan Jones and Sheldon Berman, available from Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 492-1764.

This guide was written by Sheldon Berman and Susan Jones in consultation with Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Fern Fisher, Sarah Haavind, Linda Lantieri, Diane Levin, Carol Lieber, John Mack, Rachel Poliner, Tom Roderick, Jackie Shonerd, and the staff of Educators for Social Responsibility. Portions of this text were originally published in a booklet entitled "Mom, Dad...What is Nuclear War?" prepared by Susan Jones with contributions from Sheldon Berman and Gene Thompson, printed as a public service by WBZ-TV4, Boston, Group W Broadcasting, Inc.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

ESR provides a variety of professional services to educators including curricula, workshops, and consultation on conflict management, collaborative learning, teaching controversial issues, and the development of social responsibility in young people. ESR is also offering special workshops for administrators and teachers on teaching about the Gulf Crisis and responding to children's concerns.

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